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ABSTRACT

A performance appraisal interview is a primary and important context for the supervisor and employee to work together to achieve superior performance. A survey of the research literature reveals that the appraisal interview functions to provide feedback on performance, to counsel and provide help, to discover what the employee is thinking, to teach the employee to problem solve, to help the employee discover ways to improve, to set performance goals, and to discuss compensation. In addition, the literature reveals three reasons that determine frequency of interview: the nature of the goal of the interview, the kind of position the employee has in the organization, and the characteristics of the employee's performance. Research on climate is centered on praise, criticism and the superior-subordinate relationship, while that on employee involvement in the performance appraisal process is divided into preparation and actual participation in the interview, including goal setting. Future research in this area should investigate employee development, credibility and interviewer style, evaluation and climate, and rhetorical strategies of the interviewee. (HOD)

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The Performance Appraisal Interview:

A Review of the Literature with Implications for Communication Research

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This essay draws together what is known from the research literature on performance appraisal interviewing under the headings of: function, frequency, appraiser characteristics, climate and employee participation. Shortcomings in this research are discussed as well as implications for future research.

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THE PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL:

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

The performance appraisal interview provides an intriguing communication situation for the student of organizational communication. Employees undoubtedly need the feedback of their supervisor to do their best. Yet they are often anxious at the prospect of an appraisal interview. On the other hand, supervisors recognize that employees want to know how they are doing on the job. They also realize that they should communicate with their employees about work performance. Yet, in practice, performance information is frequently not discussed with employees.[1] And when it is discussed it may be given in a perfunctory manner.[2] In addition, it has long been recognized that some supervisors avoid performance appraisal interviews, while others experience anxiety and discomfort in doing them.[3] Beyond this, the infrequent and ineffective use of performance appraisal interviews is well documented.[4] The irony of this situation is that a performance appraisal interview is a primary and important context for the supervisor and employee to work together to achieve superior performance. Yet, fear keeps the process from achieving its full potential.

Research on performance appraisal interviewing provides a promise of help for conducting these interviews, but it is broadly scattered. This essay has a twofold purpose. First, it will draw together what is known from the research literature on performance appraisal interviewing. This literature will be grouped under the headings of: function, frequency, appraiser characteristics, climate and employee participation. Second, the implications

of this research for communication research will be drawn.

FUNCTIONS OF APPRAISAL INTERVIEWS

A quick survey of the writings of researchers and other authorities on appraisal interviewing shows a myriad of expectations for functions of the employee interview. The appraisal interview might function: to provide feedback on performance, to counsel and provide help, to discover what the employee is thinking, to teach the employee to problem solve, to help the employee discover ways to improve, to set performance goals, and/or to discuss compensation. The goals of the appraisal interview seem endless. The problem created by such multiple goals is that an attempt to adopt a set of reasonable goals may become difficult for the interviewer. And without specific goals in mind the interview may lack the necessary focus to achieve anything of consequence.

One way to make this list more manageable and functional is to divide the activities into two categories: employee development needs and organizational needs. Clearly what the employer is trying to do is to help the employee be more productive and satisfied with work as a person--develop the employee, and to achieve the organizations production goals--organizational needs.

Beyond these two generally accepted functions, lies the question of discussing compensation as a function of the performance appraisal interview. Two studies have specifically addressed the question of whether this ought to be a function of the appraisal interview. The first was conducted by Meyer and his associates[5] in conjunction with the General Electric Work Planning and Performance Review Program. These researchers concluded that trying to

achieve both feedback and counselling for improvement and informing of a salary decision was less effective than splitting the roles and holding two separate interviews. They found that the employees' attitudes toward their supervisor and performance improved when these two purposes were separated. Their explanation was that when these purposes were combined in a single interview, the discussion of salary took precedence in the employee's mind over a discussion of improvement. The result was that employees wanted to make a good impression and/or justify a greater salary increase. Huse and Kay[6] reported that salary discussion contributed significantly to the overall tension of the employees they studied. Both topics--development and compensation--do not seem particularly compatible. The argument that they do not fit is compelling, but there were several confounding factors in these researcher's design. Primarily, the problem was that the interviews when separated differed in other important respects. They were different in that they were more frequent, emphasized joint goal planning, and had no summary ratings.

Cummings[7] conducted a study which sought to test this relationship in the field. He argued that expectancy theory suggests that salary be a part of an appraisal interview. His field experiment investigated employee reactions to an old and new appraisal system. The data indicated that employees had more positive attitudes to the new system that jointly addressed development and salary than to the old system that did not. Again the experiment was confounded by factors that do not permit confidence in this conclusion.

FREQUENCY

Miner[8] reported data gathered in a 1974 Bureau of National Affairs survey of personnel managers of 150 industrial and government organizations. Ninety percent of their managers, office personnel and production workers were appraised yearly. Additionally, performance appraisal interviews were conducted in about 90 percent of the cases where performance appraisals were made.

However, this data may be misleading. The problem becomes one of discovering what is meant by a performance appraisal interview. Hall and Lawler[9] report that the supervisor and subordinates sometimes have different views as to what constitutes an interview. Questioning conducted with both groups revealed that the supervisor thought of a brief, general discussion with a subordinate as a performance appraisal interview, while subordinates did not see them as such.

Other researchers have uncovered practices that place this self-report data in doubt. McCall and DeVries[10] and Meyer and his colleagues[11] discovered that supervisors resisted holding performance appraisal interviews unless the organization took specific measures to insure that they were held. Landy and Trumbo[12] report that among a number of companies they studied interviews were frequently not held to convey ratings because supervisors believed that doing so was inconvenient logistically or they believed that the ratings served no real purpose.

Recommended frequency has been an issue of concern and discussion among scholars. Three factors have been suggested as determinants of frequency: the nature of the goal of the interview, the kind of position the employee has

in the organization and characteristics of the employee's performance. Cummings and Schwab[13] suggest that a maintenance interview is all that is necessary for some employees. These people are those in routine jobs, whose record of performance is satisfactory. This same rule seems reasonable for long-time employees who are adequately performing. These employees have had the opportunity to refine their job skills and show consistent performance, thus they do not require frequent reviews.[14]

There is evidence, though, that employees ought to be interviewed at least once each year. Landy and his associates[15] indicated that personnel who were evaluated at least once each year thought their evaluations were fairer and more accurate than those who were evaluated less frequently. But, when employee development is the function of the interview, the job is nonroutine and goal setting is a part of the interview, more frequent interviews are recommended.[16]

Finally, Cummings and Schwab[17] suggest frequent reviews for the organization's low performers. They recommend weekly (and, in difficult cases, daily) interviews to monitor and give feedback on employee performance. More,rather than fewer, interviews allows the interviewer to focus more specifically and on fewer negative issues. And if Kay and his colleagues[18] are correct, the focus on fewer negative issues will improve the climate for improvement.

APPRAISER CHARACTERISTICS

One characteristic of the appraiser that is directly associated to effectiveness is credibility. Credibility in this case relates to the

appraiser's knowledge of the employee's job duties and behavior. Ilgen and his associates[19] conducted a thorough review of the literature on feedback in organizations. Their conclusion with respect to the appraiser's knowledge of the subordinate's job and behavior is that the subordinate views the feedback as more accurate and therefore is more willing to accept it when the source is knowledgeable. Landy and his colleagues[20] came to a similar conclusion. They found that subordinates who believed their supervisors to be highly knowledgeable about these two factors regarded the interview as more fair and accurate than their counterparts who viewed their supervisors as less knowledgeable.

A second characteristic of the appraiser that seems to be important is consistent style between day-to-day activity and that demonstrated in the interview.[21] A supervisor who wishes to engage in problem solving with employees in the appraisal interview, but has taken on the role of judge in day-to-day interaction with employees about their jobs is being inconsistent. Meyer and his fellow researchers[22] urge managers to adopt the role of helper rather than the role of judge both in their day-to-day interaction and in performance review sessions.

A final important characteristic of the appraiser is the ability to engage in active listening. Kikoski and Litterer[23] contend the ability to paraphrase content back to the speaker and reflect feelings, the two basic skills of active listening, contribute to the appraiser's effectiveness in appraisal interviews. They base their claim on 150 data-based studies[24] that sought to identify communication skills and assess their effectiveness.

CLIMATE

Climate in the performance appraisal interview has received considerable attention both in well-reasoned arguments and empirical research. Concerns have traditionally centered on praise, criticism and the superior-subordinate relationship.

Surprisingly, Meyer and his associates found that praise did not have much effect on the outcome of the appraisal. They concluded that "praise may be regarded as the sandwich which surrounds the raw meat.[25] That is to say, the average subordinate may believe that the supervisor's motivation for praising is preparation for the "bad news" to follow. Farson[26] argued persuasively in The Harvard Business Review that praise can also have a negative outcome. He suggests that praise might quite reasonably be viewed as threatening (i. e., a statement of superiority and a constraint on the employee's creativity).

An alternative to praise is encouragement.[27] Supervisors might ask the employee to review her accomplishments and then affirm those that they believe to be accurate. This affirmation is encouraging to the subordinate--the supervisor has agreed with him in regard to his accomplishments. Encouragement of this type avoids the sense that the employer may be pointing out accomplishments as a prelude to discussing inadequacies.

Criticism is a second factor that affects performance appraisal climate. The supervisor cannot avoid discussing shortcomings in the employee's performance if the appraisal interview is to meet organizational performance objectives. Research suggests that it is excessive criticism per se that is

problematic in the interview. Too much criticism appears to trigger the employee's defense mechanism and destroy the climate for improvement.[28] In fact, Greller[29] reported that the more the managers he studied criticized their employees, the less improvement was seen in the areas criticized. When similar areas were criticized less, managers were able to see more improvement. In addition, there was a positive correlation between the number of critical comments and the number of defensive reactions noted.

Finally, the supervisor's supportive orientation has been shown to be helpful in building an appropriate climate.[30] Nemeroff and Wexley[31] conducted a study that shows when managers take an attitude of helper--they treat the employee as an equal, show respect for the employee as a human being--the employee is more satisfied with both the session and manager than when the manager does not. Supportive behavior has also been demonstrated to be related to higher performance goal setting by the employee.[32]

A quality relationship is also important to supportiveness. Kikoski and Litterer[33] suggest that development of a quality relationship involves four communication behaviors: 1) acknowledging the employee as a person, 2) indicating that the manager understands the conditions under which the employee has labored, 3) conveying that the employee's behavior is accepted, if not necessarily approved, and 4) letting the employee know that she has been listened to and understood.

EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION

The issue of employee participation has received considerable attention in the performance appraisal interviewing literature. Employee involvement in

the performance appraisal process is usually divided into two areas: preparation and actual participation in the interview, including goal setting.

Preparation

One form of preparation is self-rating. Bassett and Meyer[34] report that most managers expect that their employees produce ratings that are unrealistically favorable. Therefore, they are reluctant to base an appraisal discussion on self-appraisals. But, based on Bassett and Meyer's investigation of actual practice managers find that employee's self-ratings are surprisingly modest. The researchers attribute this modesty to the fact that the self-appraisal is being publicly announced and that immodesty is not valued in our culture.

Burke and associates[35] discovered the act of giving a worker a structured work sheet to use in personal preparation was associated with a positive outcome for the interview. The object of the work sheet is to allow the employee time to reflect and prepare to participate. This preparation seemed to reduce the awkwardness of being asked questions that the employee could not answer without reflection. The content of the worksheet used by Burke and his associates asked the employee to suggest principle responsibilities, problems encountered in fulfilling these responsibilities, and then to describe and compare his personal performance with others who hold similar jobs.

Participation in the Interview

Aside from the actual participation itself, the "welcoming of participation" seems to be important itself. Four studies[36] have shown

correlations between such items as "boss asked my opinion" and "opportunity to present ideas and feelings" and a number of positive outcomes. Nemeroff and Wexley[37] concluded from their investigation that there seem to be two difficulties with welcoming performance: supervisors seem to underestimate the importance of the opportunity for subordinates to participate and the degree to which they, the supervisors, invite participation effectively.

Although results have been mixed, research points to the fact that, in general, the greater the employee's participation in the interview the more satisfied the person will be both with the interview and the supervisor.[38] This statement must be tempered by several limitations presented by researchers and scholars. Locke and Schweiger[39] suggest that the new employee might not have sufficient job knowledge to participate fully. They also point out that some employee's have a need for dependence on their supervisor. These employees enjoy being dependent and, therefore, are unlikely to have their own suggestions for improving their performance. French and his colleagues[40] indicate that the supervisor's usual style may have an effect on the employee's willingness to participate. If the supervisor does not normally welcome employee participation, then the employee is unlikely to participate in the interview at a high level. Basset and Meyer[41] reported similar findings with respect to incongruent styles.

Goal Setting

Goal setting is a factor that has consistently been associated with positive outcomes in appraisal interviews. Two separate studies[42] have demonstrated that setting specific goals for performance improvement yielded twice as much improvement as either setting general goals or criticism without

goal setting.

Correlation studies of goal setting have shown that the activity is positively related to employee satisfaction with the interview,[43] perceived utility of the appraisal[44] and perceived fairness and accuracy of the evaluation.[45] Goal setting in performance appraisal has also been associated with the employee's desire to improve, and later improvement[46] and greater mutual understanding and perceived fairness.[47]

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

What research is needed about factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the performance appraisal interview? While one can can see from this review of what we know about the performance appraisal interviewing that there is an abundance of research on the subject, little work has been contributed by communication scholars. This final section will focus on some communication concerns that might well be met by scholars in the organizational communication area.

First, more research is needed which focuses upon employee development needs and organizational needs. Current research suggests the degree to which the interviewer chooses to focus more on one or the other depends on whether: the person is a new or long-time employee, the job is such that goal setting is appropriate and the individual's level of performance. The new employee may need more development than the long-time employee. A routine job may not lend itself to goal setting. Individual's whose level of performance is high may not need a strong emphasis in either of these areas. Research casts doubt upon the advisability of discussing compensation in the performance appraisal

interview.

Several communication-related questions remain unanswered. For example, how does the interviewer construct messages which help the employee toward professional development? And further, how should the communication strategy employed differ based on the employee's job classification? In the absence of research one could only speculate--as many of the textbook authors do--that a schedule of questions that guides the employee through a problem-solving process might promote employee development.[48] The question of strategy related to level in the organization is a more complex issue. Here the person's experience as well as level and perhaps personality variables such as dependence/independence might dictate the particular interview strategy that would be most effective.

A second area, recommended frequency for performance appraisal interviews, has been more fully researched. Frequence of interview is best determined by considering the nature of the goal of the interview, the kind of position the employee has in the organization and the characteristics of the employee's performance. The general rule is that an employee ought to be interviewed at least once each year. When employee development is the function of the interview, the job is nonroutine and goal setting is a part of the interview, more frequent interviews are recommended. Weekly reviews are recommended for the organization's low achievers.

A third area of performance appraisal research, characteristics of the interviewer, is fertile ground for the communication researcher. Here a major concern is credibility. The research literature suggests that the supervisor must have specific knowledge of the subordinate's job and duties to have credibility. The outcome of credibility from this source is a perception by

the interviewee that the review is more accurate and a greater willingness to accept it.

Beyond the research centering on expertise and knowledge lies the nearly untouched area of communicator style. Research suggests that the appraiser's effectiveness is affected by consistency in style and active listening skills. But, what are the specific communication skills that contribute to competency? Do verbal and nonverbal skills coalesce into a set of behaviors that can be described and taught to managers? There are obviously many research questions here that can be most profitably pursued with a variety of research methodologies.

Fourth, research on climate has centered on praise, criticism and superior-subordinate relationships. Praise seems to be an ineffective strategy in the appraisal interview. Research suggests also that the interviewer should avoid too much criticism and thereby foster a supportive relationship. Very little work has been done with the idea of evaluative language and defensive behavior. Jack Gibb[49] suggested the alternative to evaluating behavior is describing it objectively. But would this meet the expectation of conveying the evaluation. Some suggest that conveying the evaluation is an important factor in the motivational process.[50] The most effective method of conveying the evaluation has not yet been clearly articulated by communication research.

Finally, with respect to participation, research indicates that the employee should be encouraged to prepare by engaging in self-rating and working through a structured worksheet. Beyond this the interviewer should be sure that the interviewee knows that participation is welcome. The employee should also be encouraged to participate in goal setting, if such an activity

is indicated. The act of goal setting may lead to increased performance, a greater desire to improve, greater satisfaction, greater utility and greater perceived fairness and accuracy.

What does the research suggest for the interviewee with respect to communication behavior? The answer is very little--nearly all research focuses upon interviewer behavior. What kind of questioning by the interviewee would be most effective? What kind of rhetorical strategies are available to the interviewee? How might an interviewee prepare most effectively? All these are questions the organizational communication researcher must yet answer.

Four areas of research seem promising. Investigation of important issues in the areas of employee development, credibility and interviewer style, evaluation and climate, and rhetorical strategies of the interviewee will provide useful additions to what we already know about performance appraisal interviewing. The answering of research questions in these areas holds the key to increasing the productiveness of the performance appraisal process as an important source of employee motivation.

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